

Aligning Disarmament to Nuclear Dangers: Off to a Hasty START?

by David A. Cooper

Key Points

Confronted by a daunting array of nuclear threats, and having pledged to reinvigorate the application of disarmament tools to address these dangers, the Obama administration has decided to focus its initial efforts on negotiating a new bilateral agreement with Russia to replace the Cold War-era Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expires at the end of this year.

Critics have suggested that reviving the U.S.-Russian strategic disarmament agenda is at best a distraction from a host of more pressing security challenges that the United States needs to address now and in the years ahead. There is no debate that it would be useful from a U.S. perspective to preserve the transparency that START provides. But Washington has little to gain directly, at least in traditional military terms, from further reductions in the legacy arsenal of its erstwhile Cold War adversary. By contrast, for reasons both political and military, Russia has an urgent incentive to achieve a strategic parity through negotiations that it otherwise could not sustain. The key issue thus becomes whether the Obama administration can achieve a modest agreement at little cost, or alternatively leverage the negotiations to gain a wider set of benefits beyond the straightforward bilateral reductions in question.

The analysis deduces that a positive outcome would provide modest ancillary benefits

for several higher priority objectives—for example, incentivizing China to participate in a wider follow-on strategic nuclear arms reduction process, or bringing greater international pressure to bear on nuclear proliferators such as Iran. However, these spinoff benefits would not be sufficient to warrant high costs in terms of major concessions of U.S. strategic interests relative to Russia. Any such costs could only be justified by the inclusion of favorable external linkages, meaning explicit Russian offsets to address higher priority nuclear dangers in return for concessions favoring Moscow's strategic interests. The Obama administration will therefore need to carefully weigh this overarching cost-benefit equation as it navigates the complexities of the first major strategic arms control talks in almost a decade.

(Re)launching Negotiations

Although the strategic arms reductions required by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) have long since been fulfilled, there are sound reasons to preserve aspects of this legacy treaty beyond December 5, 2009.¹ While few have seen this as a top national security priority, there has been no real dispute about the desirability of trying to extend at least some START elements, most notably its longstanding verification provisions. If nothing else, these proven mechanisms underpin the standalone reductions in operationally deployed strategic warheads that the

more recent Moscow Treaty requires by 2012.² As then-Secretary of State Colin Powell noted in submitting the Moscow Treaty to President George W. Bush in 2002, "START's comprehensive verification regime will provide the foundation for confidence, transparency and predictability in [these] further strategic offensive reductions."³ Largely with the aim to preserve this transparency infrastructure, the Bush administration responded positively to Russian President Vladimir Putin's call in 2006 for talks on a new treaty to replace START, which began in March 2007. However, this effort never produced a common understanding on the basic shape of a new agreement. Both sides agreed early on that they did not want to extend START per se. But whereas the United States simply wanted to enhance the Moscow Treaty with transparency measures drawn from, or, in some cases, going beyond START, Russia sought an entirely new treaty that would effectively supersede the Moscow Treaty. Its main goal was to shift the operative unit of account for Moscow Treaty reductions from deployed warheads to the START formula focusing on delivery systems.⁴ Fundamentally, the Bush administration viewed the Moscow Treaty approach as advantageous to U.S. interests, and therefore was unwilling to contemplate superseding this basic framework merely for the sake of extending verification measures.⁵

Breaking through this impasse soon after taking office, President Barack Obama in April

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jointly announced with his Russian counterpart a mandate for new bilateral negotiations to conclude a legally binding treaty by December that would reduce strategic offensive arms below Moscow Treaty levels with effective verification measures.⁶ The President in essence relaunched the negotiations by readily acceding to a key Russian aim—a new treaty to replace START and de facto to supersede the Moscow Treaty—with the dramatic additional incentive of deeper cuts. In agreeing to this mandate, President Obama raised the stakes significantly over his predecessor's efforts, not least by setting an aggressive negotiating deadline that all but ensured that these negotiations would loom large as his administration's first defining disarmament test.⁷

The initial joint presidential statement was conspicuously open to interpretation on whether the further reductions at the heart of a new post-START treaty would be based on START counting rules, the Moscow Treaty formula, a hybrid approach, or an entirely novel framework.⁸ Several months of negotiations only partially resolved this most fundamental of questions. The framework agreement that emerged from the July 2009 Moscow summit provides for reductions in strategic delivery vehicles below START limits (on the face of it, a major additional U.S. concession), as well as parallel cuts in warheads below Moscow Treaty limits. However, only broad numerical ranges are specified (500–1,100 strategic delivery vehicles, 1,500–1,675 warheads), leaving the actual numeric ceilings for negotiation.⁹ Significantly, the summit agreement also suggests that new or modified definitions will be developed (that is, new counting rules), but here too defers this issue to the negotiations.¹⁰ Beyond needing to resolve these basic questions of what is being limited and to what levels, the negotiators will face a variety of complex and thorny technical issues, possibly even including longstanding START compliance disputes.¹¹ Moreover, this will all need to be worked through in an unprecedentedly truncated negotiating timeframe.¹² As veteran Russian arms con-

trol expert Pavel Podvig notes, “Let’s hope it works, because the road to a new treaty won’t be easy.”¹³

Indeed, the challenges are such that, realistically, to conclude an agreement, the Obama administration will likely confront a choice among lowering its sights, postponing its timeline, or striking a hard bargain on a multifarious package of reciprocal concessions that is sure to include difficult tradeoffs, including possible linkages to cognate issues. This begs the fundamental question: What does the United States stand to gain from this new treaty, and what costs should it be willing to pay to get it?

Before examining post-START through the prism of U.S. interests, it is important to understand the analogous calculus in Moscow, where these negotiations represent a vital national priority. Partly this reflects the understandable political attraction for the Dmitriy Medvedev–Vladimir Putin government—with its proclivity to score points domestically by being perceived to restore Russian clout internationally—to share a spotlight on the world stage as a coequal of the United States. Just consider the presidential signing ceremony for the post-START framework agreement, replete with summit imagery evoking nostalgic echoes from two world orders ago. But underneath this political symbolism lies a deeper military imperative. Russia still openly views the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies as latent adversaries and relies on nuclear weapons to offset its substantial conventional military disadvantage. However, because even in this regard it lacks the wherewithal to maintain its strategic force levels over time, it needs deeper reciprocal reductions, particularly in delivery vehicles, to maintain any semblance of strategic equivalency with the United States. As an article co-authored in 2008 by the current U.S. chief negotiator for post-START observes, “The Russian triad has been shrinking and, regardless of any treaty, will have no more than 1,800–2,000 warheads by 2012, of

which about 70 percent will be deployed on obsolete delivery systems or launchers with an extended service life.”¹⁴ Russia’s overarching goal is therefore to use these post-START negotiations to attain a greater level of military parity than it could otherwise hope to sustain under current arrangements.

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Specific Russian objectives for the negotiations are predictable and to some extent already discernable in the nascent talks.¹⁵ These are likely to include:

- locking in quantitative strategic parity at a level that Russia can sustain (which presumably is no higher than the 1,500 warhead upper limit that Russia sought during the fruitless START III talks in the late 1990s)
- eliminating the hedge that the United States preserves to rapidly reconstitute its strategic forces by “uploading” stored warheads on existing delivery platforms while at the same time preserving the vast advantage that Russia enjoys in its capacity to reconstitute its warhead numbers through new production¹⁶
- avoiding qualitative restrictions so Russia can continue its aggressive modernization program within new numeric limits¹⁷
- excluding entirely any constraints on nonstrategic nuclear forces where Russia enjoys a staggering advantage.¹⁸

In sum, Russia will likely push for an outcome that, while reciprocal on its face, would in reality provide a net nuclear forces advantage over the United States. Additionally, the Russians are aggressively seeking to leverage the negotiations to gain restrictions on U.S. military programs that they see as

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closely linked to the bilateral nuclear balance, particularly missile defenses and conventional global strike capabilities.¹⁹ Putting it mildly, it is difficult to imagine how any outcome that even approaches this presumed Kremlin blueprint would contribute to U.S. national security interests. And yet the negotiating framework that emerged from the July summit implicitly leaves the door open to virtually all of these Russian objectives.²⁰ So what could Washington possibly hope to gain from this exercise?

Gauging the Initiative

Critics were quick to dismiss President Obama's post-START initiative when it was unveiled in April 2009 as at best an irrelevancy. "Good grief," harrumphed Charles Krauthammer, "of all the useless side-shows."²¹ George Will meanwhile opined, "Today in a world bristling with new threats, the president suggests addressing an old one—Russia's nuclear arsenal."²² As daily headlines since the launch of the negotiations have swirled with news of successful North Korean nuclear and Iranian missile

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tests and fears about Pakistani nuclear weapons falling into terrorist hands, it is easy to understand this viewpoint. For its part, the Obama administration from the outset has characterized the post-START initiative as setting the stage for a broader and deeper arms reduction process that would encompass all nuclear weapons states, which it hopes in turn may pave the way for creating a radically new global security architecture to address and eventually eradicate the

threat of nuclear weapons in all its incarnations.²³ What is striking about these ostensibly rival perspectives, however, is that they actually share the same fundamental assumption. The administration is not arguing that post-START is especially important in and of itself, but rather avers that it will prove valuable as a means to achieve wider disarmament goals. Thus, for all intents, there is a general consensus that, from a U.S. perspective, the measure of post-START's value lies beyond its immediate purpose (that is, a largely superfluous and potentially disadvantageous reciprocal reduction in the number of U.S. and Russian strategic offensive forces).

Importantly, any prospective wider benefits of post-START (along with the associated costs against which they must be weighed) could vary greatly depending on the results of the current talks. Once the framework agreement was unveiled in Moscow, some knowledgeable observers expressed dismay that the Obama administration had acceded to potentially costly concessions regarding delivery vehicles, missile defense linkages, and other lesser issues.²⁴ However, all of these apparent concessions have been cast in ambiguous enough formulations so as to leave considerable negotiating latitude. Likewise, the corresponding dearth of external linkages favorable to U.S. interests, while notable, still does not preclude their introduction in the next decisive negotiating phase. Consequently, it is premature to hazard a verdict on the merit of the initiative until the ultimate contours of a final deal are more apparent. Critics who initially denounced post-START as an irrelevancy may well be proved correct, or could even discover that they were overly sanguine if the United States ends up paying high costs for a treaty of direct value to the other party but only marginal utility for itself. On the other hand, if a deal emerges that plausibly addresses a wider set of nuclear perils, even at a steep cost in terms of the U.S. strategic posture relative to Russia, then it could represent a net security gain for the United States.

Of course, a simplistic perspective might be that any reduction in existing nuclear arsenals intrinsically helps to lessen the panoply of dangers that these weapons pose; that

fewer weapons anywhere equals less danger everywhere. However, a more sophisticated approach would consider nuances across the array of nuclear weapons issues, in the first instance in terms of the relative hierarchy of danger that they pose to the United States and its allies, as well as inevitable tradeoffs among the tools to address them. For example, if Iran succeeds in obtaining an entry-level nuclear arsenal capable of targeting U.S. allies and forces, and if this were deemed a greater danger than Russian nuclear missiles capable of reaching the U.S. homeland, then, assuming all other factors as equal, trading European theater missile defenses for Russian strategic offensive reductions would not make much sense. But flip the ranking priority, and this becomes a perfectly justifiable accommodation. As this example illustrates, assaying negotiating tradeoffs and outcomes requires a framework for analysis based on a clear hierarchy of nuclear dangers.

A logical ranking of nuclear threats from a U.S. perspective follows:

- "Loose nukes" or fissile material. Terrorist acquisition of nuclear weapons or materials (including through theft, corruption, or in the context of a failed weapons of mass destruction state) poses the greatest risk of nuclear or radiological attack against U.S. and other populations.

- Horizontal nuclear proliferation. The emergence or expansion of new nuclear weapons states (particularly those with hostile or unstable governments) would profoundly degrade U.S. geopolitical interests by significantly increasing the risk of nuclear weapons being threatened or used in regional conflicts involving the United States or its allies, and ultimately increases the odds of terrorist acquisition.

- Expansion of Chinese nuclear forces. Continuation of the decade-long buildup of Chinese nuclear forces could eventually alter the strategic balance between the United States and a potential regional or even peer rival (particularly as Washington pursues further strategic reductions).

- Russian tactical nuclear weapons. Russia's widely deployed nonstrategic nuclear forces pose a significant "loose nuke" threat,

even as Russian nuclear doctrine lowers the nuclear threshold by relying on these as warfighting tools to offset imbalances in conventional forces relative to both NATO and China.

■ Russian strategic forces modernization. To the extent that Russian strategic nuclear forces pose a residual threat due to resurgent Russian belligerence, it is an active force modernization program, and not already declining aggregate numbers of warheads or delivery vehicles, that represents the chief concern.

While this ranking represents a necessarily subjective judgment, it is broadly consistent with the preponderance of U.S. strategic thinking.²⁵ More to the point, it is nearly inconceivable that the aggregate number of Russian strategic forces—the very problem that post-START seeks to address—would rank anywhere other than at the low end of virtually any mainstream hierarchy of nuclear dangers from a U.S. perspective. This validates the implicit assumption that the key metric for evaluating post-START will be its wider ramifications, specifically as measured by its cumulative sway in countering this array of more pressing nuclear perils.²⁶

Wider Effects

“Loose Nukes.” Russia’s sprawling nuclear weapons complex remains a key aspect of the loose nukes threat. Notwithstanding considerable progress that has been achieved to improve overall nuclear security conditions, the situation remains a cause for concern. Moreover, despite the transparency provided through arms control verification and cooperative efforts such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction program, sizeable parts of Russia’s nuclear weapons complex remain opaque.²⁷ However, the potential impact of post-START on this problem-set is likely to be inconsequential.

In theory, further strategic offensive reductions should equate to fewer nuclear weapons to worry about. However, in practice post-START is unlikely to result in any Russian cuts that would not have happened in any case through the continuing attrition

of its strategic posture. Moreover, depending on what counting rules apply, the reductions considered would not necessarily translate into fewer aggregate warheads; neither START nor the Moscow Treaty currently limits nondeployed warhead stockpiles. Indeed, from a nuclear security perspective, warheads deployed on strategic delivery platforms may be more secure in the near term than those removed (whether permanently or temporarily while awaiting dismantlement) to potentially less secure storage facilities. Moreover, the physical removal itself raises heightened risks because transportation is inherently the most vulnerable link in a nuclear weapon’s custody chain. Finally, post-START will not apply to the sources of Russia’s greatest nuclear security risks: several thousand non-strategic nuclear weapons and stockpiles of weapons-grade fissile material.

In terms of transparency, some marginal benefit might accrue if verification

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provisions were to emerge from the post-START negotiations that included warhead inventories, since this would cast a wider net than START’s platform-centric measures. However, Russia has traditionally resisted intrusive warhead verification schemes, as witnessed during START III talks in the late 1990s. Nor would the nuclear security benefits justify this as a key U.S. negotiating aim, since arguably Cooperative Threat Reduction and similar programs provide a more effective means for enhancing transparency and enabling the Russian government to improve nuclear security in accordance with its own self interests.

Finally, loose nuke dangers extend well beyond Russia and its neighbors, as recent

events in Pakistan aptly illustrate. But post-START will not address this dimension of the problem even indirectly. It would not even offer a useful template for others to emulate, since the global solution lies not in Cold War-era verification archetypes, but rather in expanding the cooperative threat reduction model and in improving national capacities and multinational collaboration in law enforcement, border security, and maritime and air interdiction.²⁸ Nor do the negotiations offer a potential lever with which to pry better Russian cooperation since Moscow is already foursquare behind such efforts, as exemplified by its co-leading the U.S.-sponsored Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. On balance, then, post-START offers little, if any, remediation for nuclear security dangers.

Nuclear Proliferation. The international system may well be standing at the precipice of a wholesale collapse of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. But whether disarmament can help solve this problem has long been a subject of fierce debate. As one analyst observes, “Foreign policy realists have argued that disarmament steps were irrelevant to other countries’ calculations concerning their aspirations for nuclear weapons, while nonproliferation advocates argued that such steps were still relevant for the balance and sustainability of the nonproliferation regime as a whole.”²⁹ On one hand, the empirical evidence does not bolster the premise that arms reduction begets nonproliferation; a succession of significant reductions in nuclear armaments over the past two decades—including the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, 1991 START Treaty, 1991 and 1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, and 2002 Moscow Treaty, as well as unilateral cutbacks by Britain and France—have occurred in parallel to a rising drumbeat of nuclear proliferation by countries such as India, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Pakistan, and Syria. However, some would discount these disarmament instances as insufficiently far-reaching to produce the desired nonproliferation effects. For analytic purposes, though, it hardly matters. Post-START is envisioned as a modest incremental step toward deeper disarmament, and therefore cannot in itself seriously be ascribed as

an audacious enough stroke to sway hitherto determined proliferators.

What a successful post-START outcome can realistically do is provide a moderate tactical advantage to the United States and its allies in the diplomatic maneuvering that will occur at next year's Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. Whatever the tangible merit of leading by example as a nonproliferation strategy, the linkage of disarmament by the five sanctioned nuclear weapons states and nonproliferation by everyone else is formally enshrined in the basic NPT bargain, and proliferators and their apologists have always alleged that it is the failure of the nuclear powers to pursue disarmament sufficiently that undermines the NPT (and by inference justifies their own behavior). By arriving at the conference with a new arms reduction treaty in hand and the promise of more to come, the United States should be in a stronger position to turn the tables on Iran in particular by demonstrating that Washington is living up to its part of the bargain, and that Iranian cheating is the real problem. But whereas this dynamic would be useful, the benefits should not be exaggerated. In the larger scheme of things, a strongly worded condemnation of Iran emerging from the 2010 NPT Review Conference, or even structural improvements in NPT verification and

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compliance tools, are unlikely to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions (and would have no direct impact on India, Israel, North Korea, or Pakistan). Furthermore, a far greater influence on the Review Conference's

outcome than this or anything else that the United States might do will be the extent of Tehran's own flagrancy in carrying forward its nuclear weapons and missile programs while maintaining the fiction that it is abiding by NPT.³⁰ In a nutshell, a successful post-START outcome as such would be helpful from a nonproliferation perspective, albeit modestly so.

Where post-START does have the potential drastically either to help or to harm in countering nuclear proliferation is through the lever that the negotiations provide for extracting tangential tradeoffs, depending on which side does the leveraging and for what. For example, although Russia remains a secondary player to China on the North Korea nuclear issue, it has been an indispensable enabler for Iran. Brushing aside U.S. concerns, Russia has profited from building Iran's Bushehr nuclear reactor complex, while at the same time using its United Nations Security Council veto to stand as a bulwark against tough international sanctions in response to Iran's parade of nuclear provocations. It is debatable whether even the harshest sanctions would be enough to deflect Iran from its nuclear path, if only because Tehran has never faced truly painful consequences of economic, or even diplomatic, isolation. A disadvantageous treaty on strategic offensive reductions that was obtained in exchange for Russia getting serious about bringing stringent sanctions to bear on Iran and North Korea could be an appealing tradeoff that Russia might conceivably accept if the United States drives a hard bargain. Or to take another example suggested by a former U.S. disarmament envoy:

U.S.-Russian-NATO missile defense cooperation . . . would send a very strong signal to Iranian leaders that if they actually acquire nuclear weapons, the great powers will act together to ensure that Iran will not gain from that move. . . . Proposing joint missile defenses would be a good test of the potential nonproliferation payoffs for the United States of addressing Russian strategic concerns.³¹

Given that the Bush administration was never able to gain traction with Russia

on this idea, any leverage gained from post-START talks might prove helpful.

On the negative side of this equation, external linkages that Russia is seeking (apparently with some success) could be damaging from a proliferation response perspective. Iran's recent test of a new medium-range solid-fuel missile serves to underscore the growing importance that European missile defenses could play in reassuring allies and denying Iran bullying rights if it successfully crosses the nuclear weapons finishing line. While President Obama has indicated that the future of U.S. missile defense programs will depend on technical feasibility and cost effectiveness, it would nonetheless be harmful for Washington to make concessions in a post-START context before these issues can be resolved by forgoing a potential means to mitigate the impact of Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons.³² Likewise, the Prompt Global Strike program, which would use intercontinental missiles to deliver conventional payloads, represents a negligible factor in the U.S.-Russian strategic balance, but could be a critical tool for responding militarily to threats from emergent nuclear powers without having to resort to the first use of nuclear weapons.³³

Chinese Nukes. Inducing Beijing to engage in some type of nuclear arms control process is plainly one of the Obama administration's goals for the post-START initiative. Just days after announcing post-START with his Russian counterpart, President Obama used a major overseas speech to declare, "This will set the stage for further cuts, and we will seek to include all nuclear weapons states in this endeavor."³⁴ Presumably, Great Britain and France were not at the top of his mind.

China has been in the throes of a sustained strategic buildup for the past decade and its expansion and modernization program is gaining notable momentum.³⁵ Until now, Beijing has deftly expanded its nuclear forces while still eating its proverbial disarmament cake. Official Chinese policy has embraced nuclear disarmament in principle, but with a preclusive caveat: "The two countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals bear special and primary responsibilities . . . to create conditions for

achieving the ultimate goal of complete and thorough nuclear disarmament.”³⁶

It would be specious to imagine that another incremental round of strategic reductions by the United States and Russia could persuade China to reverse or even to slow the upward trajectory of its strategic force posture. As one prominent Chinese academic expert candidly observed in response to this very question, “It is not our agenda to reduce, it is our agenda to increase.”³⁷ But some observers posit that a successful post-START outcome could be used as a vehicle to cajole China into tentative first steps, for instance, considering informal transparency or confidence-building measures.³⁸ And while China may fall back on reiterating that it should not be expected to constrain capabilities until and unless the U.S.-Russia arsenals approach Chinese levels, this familiar refrain could ring newly hollow against the backdrop of a successful post-START outcome, particularly heading into the diplomatic glare of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

As a gambit to step up pressure on China to curtail expansion of its strategic forces, the mere fact of new U.S.-Russian cuts would probably be more important than the particulars. But there are details that could affect this equation. For example, on the negative side, U.S. missile defense capabilities are a central variable in China’s thinking about its own nuclear posture. Any negotiating tradeoff with Russia that curtails these capabilities would thereby undercut a crucial element of U.S. leverage with China in any future talks. Likewise, U.S.-Russian cuts that go too deep hypothetically could incentivize China’s unilateral buildup by putting a hitherto unattainable path to strategic parity within reach. Conversely, on the positive side, it would be manifestly helpful if Russia could be convinced to jointly announce at the conclusion of post-START that this newest treaty represents the end of the line for bilateral strategic offensive reductions, and that any further reductions will need to be negotiated in a broader context.

Russian Tactical Nukes. Post-START seems likely to undermine Washington’s ability to address the most worrisome and unregulated element of Russia’s nuclear forces. By

agreeing to fast-track a strategic treaty that Moscow wants without any concrete reference to nonstrategic measures, the United States has almost certainly forfeited any leverage that it may have had to induce Russia to bring its tactical nuclear weapons to the arms control table. Moscow’s current attitude is succinctly captured by its Washington ambassador, who recently quipped, “When it comes to non-strategic nuclear weapons, I would say that if you decide to move to the world free of nuclear

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weapons, at some point it needs to be dealt with.”³⁹ The message is clear: nobody should be holding his breath. Barring some type of interim outcome that preserves the option of including tactical nuclear forces in a follow-on negotiation, probably the most that the United States can hope to leverage from the post-START process is a hortatory pledge to take up this issue at some future juncture (very much along the lines of a similar pledge that accompanied the Moscow Treaty). The fact that the negotiating framework agreed at the Moscow summit did not contain even a passing allusion to nonstrategic nuclear forces is not reassuring even in this small regard. On the other hand, if post-START really does end up paving the way for wider nuclear arms reduction talks as the Obama administration hopes, then the United States might well find common cause with China on this issue.

Potential Outcomes

A “grand bargain” wherein the United States concedes to Russian interests on strategic nuclear reductions (for example, relatively deeper cuts in delivery vehicles and/or warhead

stockpiles) in return for a package of tangible and significant gains from Russia on higher priority issues (such as getting serious about Iran, cooperating on missile defense, limiting tactical nuclear weapons, and so forth) could be an advantageous deal, assuming it proved balanced and enforceable. Failing that, a “low hanging fruit” outcome that satisfies the minimum expectations that have been raised—for example, limits at the high end of the ranges under consideration (1,100 delivery vehicles and 1,675 warheads), using counting rules that avoid or minimize actual cuts in current inventories of deployed strategic delivery vehicles and stockpiled warheads, and with no concrete U.S. concessions on external linkages—could on balance be marginally beneficial as impetus for wider initiatives affecting other priorities, especially as compared to the costs that a failed negotiation would inflict in those areas. That said, any further U.S. concessions beyond these parameters would quickly tilt the scales away from U.S. interests. In other words, absent Russian tradeoffs in other areas, the modest wider benefits of new strategic reductions would not justify paying more than moderate costs in the strategic nuclear sphere and on no account should undercut higher priority goals. Thus, an outcome that leans toward Russia’s narrow interests (that is, cuts in U.S. strategic delivery platforms and warhead stockpiles) and that does not also include favorable counterbalancing Russian linkages would be disadvantageous. Throw in U.S. concessions on external linkages that could undermine higher priority U.S. nuclear weapons interests (for example, constraints on missile defense), and the result would be positively pernicious.

What is the likely outcome? Notwithstanding an apparent pattern of lopsided U.S. concessions in the early phases, the trajectory of these negotiations still appears largely up for grabs. The good news is that the Obama administration is negotiating in a seller’s market. After all, it is Russia that wants bilateral strategic offensive reductions as such, whereas President Obama is merely priming the pump for other things. That bodes well, provided that the administration appreciates this dynamic and keeps its eye on the big picture.

Notes

¹ START is formally known as the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. It is also sometimes referred to as START I to distinguish it from the subsequent START II (which never entered into force) and the later START III negotiations (which never produced a treaty). Although signed in 1991 as a bilateral treaty with the Soviet Union, following its collapse, the 1992 Lisbon Protocol transformed START into a multilateral treaty with Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the United States as equal States Parties. START entered into force on December 5, 1994, and unless extended by its own terms automatically expires 15 years later, on December 5, 2009.

² The Moscow Treaty is formally known as the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Strategic Offensive Reductions (May 24, 2002).

³ Colin L. Powell, "Letter of Submittal," in *Moscow Treaty* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2002), 7.

⁴ Interview with Paula A. DeSutter, former Assistant Secretary of State for Verification, Compliance, and Implementation, who for a period served as the Bush administration's chief negotiator for START follow-on talks.

⁵ START counts warhead totals based on agreed warhead capacities of delivery platforms (for example, missiles and bombers) rather than the actual number of warheads deployed or stockpiled, whereas the Moscow Treaty limits operationally deployed strategic warheads. Because the Moscow Treaty unit of account permits retention of excess warheads in storage as well as excess delivery capacity (by keeping excess delivery vehicles and/or deploying fewer warheads on them than they are capable of carrying), stored warheads could be "uploaded" to these platforms once the treaty expires (which occurs on the same day that its limits take effect). Thus, the Moscow Treaty preserves a "hedge" for the United States since it has sustainable excess delivery capacity within START limits. This makes force reconstitution in the event of changed circumstances a quicker and cheaper option under the Moscow Treaty framework than would be the case for equal reductions under START counting rules. Additionally, limits based on delivery vehicles can extend constraints beyond strategic offensive forces (for example, by counting missile defense interceptors and decommissioned or conventionally armed missiles, bombers, and submarines against strategic nuclear warhead totals).

⁶ "Joint Statement by Dmitriy A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, and Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, Regarding Negotiations on Further Reduction in Strategic Offensive Arm [sic] (April 1, 2009)," available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-Statement-by-Dmitriy-A-Medvedev-and-Barack-Obama/>.

⁷ Notwithstanding the President's commitment to conclude a treaty by December 2009, this

deadline was not highlighted again during July's summit in Moscow. Moreover, senior U.S. officials have publicly suggested from early in the process that this deadline could be extended if necessary. See comments by Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller during a panel discussion on April 6, 2009, entitled "Whither U.S.-Russian Relations?" at the Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference in Washington, DC, available at <www.carnegieendowment.org/files/npc_us_russia4.pdf>. At least one informed observer has speculated that any outcome by December would be no more than an interim arrangement, leaving difficult issues to a second phase of bilateral negotiations (see Daryl G. Kimball, "Background Briefing for Reporters: The START Follow-on Agreement and Beyond, June 19, 2009," available at <www.armscontrol.org/node/3711>).

⁸ The April joint presidential statement refers to "reductions in *strategic offensive arms* that will be lower than those in the 2002 Moscow Treaty." While this appears to suggest using the Moscow Treaty's unit of account, the inclusion of strategic offensive arms in the formulation could be interpreted as suggesting START counting rules since this term is verbatim from START's formal name and yet does not appear anywhere in the Moscow Treaty. Undoubtedly aware of this, President Obama a few days later in his Prague speech deftly reformulated the description of the post-START goal as reducing "warheads and stockpiles," suggesting that the United States may have initially been aiming for a modified Moscow Treaty approach that reduces total warhead numbers (versus merely restricting the number that are operationally deployed) while steering clear of a framework focusing on delivery systems. See "Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Czech Republic," available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered>.

⁹ These ranges almost certainly represent negotiating positions that will be narrowed (with Russia favoring something at the lower end and the United States seeking a higher number). Even the 1,100 ceiling at the high end of the potential range for strategic delivery vehicles is well below the 1,600 ceiling allowed under START. However, that does not necessarily mean that it would require deep cuts. Without knowing the new counting rules that will apply, any numerical limit is largely meaningless. For example, according to one analyst, by some counts the United States currently has only 798 strategic delivery vehicles and therefore might not have to make any actual cuts within the upper half of the range of limits under consideration (see Hans N. Kristensen, "START Follow-on: What SORT of Agreement," available at <www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2009/7/start.php>).

¹⁰ For the complete text of the Joint Understanding framework agreement signed at the Moscow summit, see <www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/The-Joint-Understanding-for-The-Start-Follow-On-Treaty/>.

¹¹ During its nearly decade and a half of existence, START has been the subject of a continuous negotiating process in the form of a Joint Compliance

and Inspection Commission, which carries on its books the seeds of many obscure complications for U.S. post-START negotiators.

¹² The Moscow Treaty was negotiated in a similar timeframe. However, this treaty merely codified unilateral cuts that had already been announced in a treaty so simple that using 6-point type, it can literally fit on two sides of a standard business card.

¹³ Pavel Podvig, "Reaction to the Obama-Medvedev Joint Statement on Arms Control," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 3, 2009, available at <www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/columnists/pavel-podvig/reaction-to-the-obama-medvedev-joint-statement-arms-control>.

¹⁴ Alexei Arbatov and Rose Gottemoeller, "New Presidents, New Agreements? Advancing U.S.-Russian Strategic Arms Control," *Arms Control Today* (July-August 2008), available at <www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_07-08/CoverStory>.

¹⁵ For a current and comprehensive review of Russia's nuclear arms control goals from the Soviet Union onward, see Andrei Shoumikhin, *Goals and Methods of Russian Arms Control Policy: Implications for U.S. Security* (Washington, DC: National Institute Press, 2008). For a revealing analysis of the political forces that shaped Russia's post-Cold War disarmament agenda, see John W.R. Leppingwell, "START II and Politics of Arms Control in Russia," *International Security* 20, no. 2 (1995), 63-91.

¹⁶ "Joint Statement by Dmitriy A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, and Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, Regarding Negotiations on Further Reduction in Strategic Offensive Arm [sic] (April 1, 2009)."

¹⁷ Russian strategic modernization includes the ongoing production and deployment of the Topol-M (SS-27) to replace earlier generation intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), development of the Bulava (SS-NX-30) submarine-launched ballistic missile, and development of the RS-24 heavy ICBM with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, the latter of which is explicitly intended to defeat U.S. missile defense systems. See "Nuclear Notebook: Russian Nuclear Forces, 2009," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (May-June 2009), 55-64. That said, this Russian goal may be shared to some extent with Washington; although Russia's modernization plans are both more urgent and farther along, the Pentagon also envisions modernizing its own strategic forces. See Amy F. Woolf, *U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces: Background, Developments, and Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009).

¹⁸ Russia does not provide official information on the number or disposition of its nonstrategic nuclear arsenal. One current estimate is that Russia has approximately 5,380 nonstrategic warheads, of which some 2,050 are deployed, compared to a U.S. total of 500 nonstrategic warheads, all of which are deployed. See "Nuclear Notebook: Russian Nuclear Forces, 2009," 61.

¹⁹ See, for example, press reports on a statement by Russian President Medvedev on June 20, 2009, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090620/ap_on_re_eu/eu_netherlands_russia_us>. For a

fuller explanation, see the transcript of statements by Russian ambassador to the United States and former chief disarmament negotiator Sergey Kislyak during a panel discussion on April 6, 2009, with U.S. post-START chief negotiator in Gottemoeller.

²⁰ The inclusion of delivery vehicles as a unit of account for reductions appears to represent a major U.S. concession. Additionally, the Joint Understanding agrees to consider both missile defense and conventional global strike in the context of strategic reductions. See <www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/The-Joint-Understanding-for-The-Start-Follow-On-Treaty/>.

²¹ Charles Krauthammer, "It's Your Country Too, Mr. President," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2009, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/09/AR2009040903367.html>.

²² George F. Will, "Potemkin Country," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2009, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/17/AR2009041702321.html>.

²³ See, for example, "Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square"; Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg, "Address to the Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference," April 6, 2009, transcript by Federal News Service, Washington, DC, 4.

²⁴ See, for example, Keith B. Payne, "Arms Control Amnesia: The New Talks with Moscow Could Put the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent in Jeopardy," *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2009, available at <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124693303362103841.html>>.

²⁵ Consider that the five "challenges" framing the Obama administration's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review include violent extremist movements (with nuclear terrorism presumably integral to that concern and very much highlighted in the President's April 5 disarmament speech in Prague), the spread of weapons of mass destruction (with nuclear weapons presumably topping this list), rising powers with sophisticated weapons (widely understood to be a polite reference to China), and failed or failing states (with the potential for failed nuclear weapons states such as Pakistan or North Korea presumably topping this list). For details, see "2010 QDR Terms of Reference Fact Sheet (April 27, 2009)," U.S. Department of Defense Office of Public Affairs, 2009.

²⁶ The United States has other national security interests beyond nuclear dangers, as well as other national interests beyond national security. One could argue that post-START would be useful if it did nothing more than set U.S.-Russian relations on a more cooperative keel. Or one could imagine any number of specific quid pro quo tradeoffs that would be defensible. A trenchant real-world example is Russia's surprise agreement at the July summit in Moscow to allow supply of U.S. forces in Afghanistan through its airspace, which some speculate may have been a concession to offset U.S. concessions in the post-START mandate. But in light of the pains that the Obama administration has taken to highlight the singularly grave threat that nuclear weapons represent to the American people, and given that it has explicitly and exclusively linked post-

START to reducing this threat, it seems reasonable to take this metric at face value.

²⁷ For a sobering examination of one particularly worrisome aspect of this issue, see Igor Khripunov and Nicolas N. Fernandez, "Open Sesame—Risk from Russia's Closed Nuclear Cities," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2008.

²⁸ For a discussion in particular of the wider applicability of the Cooperative Threat Reduction model, see Kenneth N. Luongo, "Loose Nukes in New Neighborhoods: The Next Generation of Proliferation Prevention," *Arms Control Today* (May 2009), available at <www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_5/Luongo>.

²⁹ Sharon Squassoni, "The New Disarmament Discussion," *Current History* (January 2009), 34.

³⁰ India, Pakistan, and Israel have never belonged to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and thus have no international obligation against pursuing and possessing nuclear weapons. North Korea developed its nuclear weapons program covertly while a party to NPT, but then withdrew from the treaty. With the termination of covert Iraqi and Libyan programs, only Iran and Syria are believed to be pursuing nuclear weapons illegally from within the NPT. Because Syria's nuclear weapons program is thought to have suffered a major setback as a result of a September 2007 Israeli airstrike, only Iran stands poised to attain nuclear weapons capability while remaining a party to NPT.

³¹ Lewis A. Dunn, "Reshaping Strategic Relationships: Expanding the Arms Control Toolbox," *Arms Control Today* (May 2009), available at <www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_5/Dunn>.

³² For an excellent discussion of the relationship between European missile defenses, U.S. national missile defense, and Iranian nuclear proliferation, see Peppino A. DeBiaso, "Missile Defense and NATO Security," *Joint Force Quarterly* 51 (4th Quarter, 2008), 46–51.

³³ However, it should be said that the Prompt Global Strike concept does have important implications for strategic stability. Namely, it will be essential to ensure that launches for conventional strikes are not misinterpreted as a nuclear attack. It is incumbent on the United States to address this problem with both Russia and China before this capability is ever used.

³⁴ Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square."

³⁵ For an up-to-date summary of Chinese strategic modernization, see Richard D. Fisher, Jr., "Red Alert—China Modernises its Nuclear Missile Force," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 14, 2009; for an authoritative summary of China's overall strategic force posture, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2009), 24–28, available at <www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Power_Report_2009.pdf>.

³⁶ *China's Endeavors for Arms Control, Disarmament and Nonproliferation* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005), available at <www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/140320.htm>.

³⁷ Shulong Chu, Tsinghua University, responding to questions on April 6, 2009, during the Panel on U.S.-China Strategic Stability of the 2009 Carnegie Nonproliferation Conference, available at <www.carnegieendowment.org/files/npc_us_china3.pdf>.

³⁸ Christopher P. Twomey, "Chinese-U.S. Strategic Affairs: Dangerous Dynamism," *Arms Control Today* (January-February 2009), available at <www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_01-02/china_us_dangerous_dynamism>.

³⁹ Sergey I. Kislyak during panel discussion on "Wither U.S.-Russia Relations?" at the Carnegie Nonproliferation Conference, April 6, 2009, available at <www.carnegieendowment.org/files/npc_us_russia4.pdf>.

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